

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

The following letter touches on a problem of which many of you have, no doubt, had experience in one form or another :—

"When I took over a C.D. Post in South-East London, I automatically accepted three things—(1) that my staff would lie, (2) that some of them would steal, (3) that I should not be just. I was quite prepared to put across my point of view about justice, namely that it, justice (a relative term anyway), takes a very long time and that I should probably get bored in the middle and be unjust in order to get on with the job, e.g. 'You *must* scrub the floor to-day even if it isn't your turn.'

"The lying and stealing have always seemed to me perfectly natural, but living with it I was forced to wonder why on earth I did neither—the answer was, of course, social security and an education which gave me a chance of using my brains in a legitimate manner. There is very little intelligence needed in lorry-driving; so if, unfortunately, a lorry-driver is born with brains, nicking petrol or lifting goods is the obvious outlet. There are very definite standards of dishonesty—one doesn't steal from one's own class, nor, rather surprisingly, from another if one knows they are living on their earnings, nor from someone who has done one a good turn. Naturally there are those who do not live up to these standards. Being honest is just rank stupid. I am fully convinced that my own fastidious standards of truth and honesty had not the slightest 'influence' on anyone, being quite unrelated to life—though had I lowered them, being notoriously a church-goer, I should have heard the remark sooner or later, 'calls 'erself a Christian!' (Might it not be a fruitful field of research to discover what non-Christians think Christians should be like—I *so* often heard that 'calls 'isself or 'erself a Christian,' sometimes so ignorantly, and at others I have been appalled at the standards expected of us.)

"The essential goodness was there all the time—decency being particularly noticeable as we lived on top of each other, sleeping and waking. There was no swearing—in my hearing. My own standard is fairly low, so it had nothing to do with that, but there may be a code against swearing in front of one's boss. I don't know that, but I do know I was 'influenced' and my own standard came up! The kindness, generosity, fellowship which we know are characteristic of 'the poor' were all there, but particularly to be found in the Pubs. Outside one is suspicious lest someone asks one to do something for nothing, and there are always 'my rights' to protect and so on, but once inside . . ."

Here is another letter from a layman whose work is among men in the Services :—

"I am amazed at how often I am asked by all sorts of chaps to help them to make decisions on matters of conduct. 'You're a Christian, so you ought to know' is the line often taken. Among the great majority of those I meet the idea that certain actions are in themselves right or wrong is quite dying out; all action is considered as relative to the persons concerned. We have often had arguments about such things as whether it is wrong to avoid paying your bus fare if you possibly can, and the general conclusion is that you're a mug if you don't, and that public bodies are fair game. Yet I meet lots of chaps who would be glad to have a clear black and white statement on conduct, and who honestly would put up with a great deal in carrying it out, and they are disappointed if I say, 'I can't make up your mind for you; I can only give you some considerations to weigh in making up your own mind.' They expect Christianity to give them a clear authoritative lead. I am quite sure that there is a widespread desire for some code of behaviour which is felt to be reasonable and authoritative."

The following points deserve attention :—

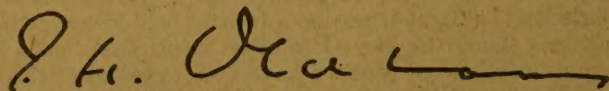
(1) Those who feel no obligation themselves to observe standards expect Christians to act differently. It would be interesting, as one of the writers suggests, to know just what they expect from Christians and what is the source of these expectations.

(2) In spite of the break-down of traditional standards, there is a desire for some kind of authoritative guidance. This desire may point in two very different directions. It may be an urge to escape from personal responsibility and lose one's individuality in a dead level of social conformity or blind submission to authority. This flight from responsibility is the theme of Dr. Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom*.¹ On the other hand, as Dr. Mannheim shows in his latest book, which is the subject of this week's Supplement, life becomes impossible if everything is open to question and there is nowhere direction of any kind. If society is to hold together, there must be some basic virtues which are commonly accepted and which all the members of society are expected to acknowledge.

(3) The state of things described in the first letter brings home the fact—the far-reaching implications of which are only now beginning to be appreciated—that the conduct of individuals is largely determined by their group ties. *Direct* moral or Christian teaching addressed to individuals may be powerless to effect a change, unless influences are brought to bear simultaneously on the attitudes of the group as a whole ; though it is also true that the final break often comes about by the courageous action of an individual. The significance of the group is one of the subjects treated in Dr. Mannheim's book. Recent investigations, including a study of gangs in Chicago, lead him to this conclusion :—

“It is impossible to change a young boy who is a member of a gang by teaching and admonition—that is to say by means of an individual approach. But it is possible to achieve some success in re-adjustment by taking him as a member of his gang, and by giving the gang a new and socially useful task. Then the youngster will be changed not as an individual, but as a member of a gang, and in this way the unexplored forces of group communication will become a powerful means of re-education.”

Yours sincerely,



¹ See footnote to Supplement.

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